



THE SCHOLAR

Finding hope through history

Text by Holly Hudson : Photo by Angela Shoemaker

A sharp intellect and curiosity keep **Dr. Irwin Abrams**, Ph.D., one of the world's leading authorities on the Nobel Peace Prize, writing and publishing at 94.

As I arrive for our interview on a dreary and sub-zero Ohio winter day, Dr. Abrams greets me at the door in shorts. He maneuvers deftly past stacks of books and papers to the sun room, pointing out as we go the many paintings and sculptures made by his late wife, Freda.

Since retiring after 32 years as a professor of European History and International Studies at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, Abrams has embarked on a new career: archiving for history the acceptance speeches of Nobel Peace Prize laureates. Dating back to 1901, the speeches are contained in several books by Abrams. He's also written articles and essays on the international peace movement. When I ask if he considered a more traditional retirement, he laughs. "I just never thought of stopping. What would I do?"

An epiphany inspired his second career. During the 1970s, Abrams was part of a project that helped prepare Oregon high school students for studying abroad. When asked who their heroes were, all the students came up with were rap stars. "That made me decide I should do a book, and that people needed to know about these laureates," Abrams says.

So began the process of editing and collating the speeches of the laureates into accessible books that can be used in classrooms. The work has taken him to Oslo, where the Peace Prize is awarded each year. Since Abrams stopped traveling in 2005, his grandson, Scott, attends the ceremony as his unofficial representative—his eyes and ears and a personal link to colleagues there.

Abrams gets around well and, barring snow and ice, often walks the quarter mile into town. An ebullient man, he tells countless stories about some of the most notable laureates he's met over the years. When I ask how this work has shaped his view of world politics, he says simply, "It gives me hope." Abrams is relieved that Al

Gore has not returned to politics, as many urged him to do after accepting the 2007 Peace Prize. "I think he's got a dream, and it's a world-important dream," says Abrams, referring to Gore's environmental work.

Abrams continues to be inspired by many of the laureates he's met, including Linus Pauling, Albert Schweitzer, Betty Williams, Nelson Mandela, and Desmond Tutu. He's especially moved, he says, by both Mandela's and Tutu's capacity for forgiveness and humor.

Born in 1914 to Jewish parents in San Francisco, Abrams converted to Quakerism as a young man, believing religion should be an act of free will. He attended Stanford University

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and received his Ph.D. from Harvard before volunteering with the American Friends Service Committee in Europe during World War II. After the war, his family settled in Yellow Springs, where he began his teaching career at Antioch. He and his wife raised three children.

We're interrupted by a call from his daughter, Carole, who's shopping for groceries at Trader Joe's. Abrams makes sure she's buying enough salmon patties. He is adamant about eating salmon several times a week, as he feels it keeps his mind sharp. He also avoids dairy products and sweets, and he drinks half a glass of Spanish red wine with dinner every night. Aside

from the reading and writing that fills his days, there is one more constant: He stays up late to watch Charlie Rose every night.

Talking with Abrams is a bit like watching a wave crest and recede again, as he gathers momentum for the next thought or story. Sometimes his voice cracks with emotion as he remembers his wife. He pauses, and then a minute later charges on, his gusto restored. One of the hardest things about being in your 90s, he says, is simply outliving most of your friends. But the best thing is "still being here."

Central to his life is his relationship with his grandson Scott who, although he lives on the West Coast, stays in close contact. Along with setting up Abrams' website, irwinabrams.com, and computer work station, Scott is collaborating with his granddad on a current book.

On a recent morning, Abrams was out for his walk around a nearby clinic when a car pulled up and a woman offered a ride. Abrams declined, saying he was getting his exercise, but then worried that he might have offended her. "I saw to it that we had a really nice wave," he says. He is grateful for small town life. "This is the kind of thing that happens here—somebody sees an old geezer hobbling along and they stop to help."

"Old geezer" or not, Abrams is always open to new trends and ideas. Recently he asked his grandson whether he should join the online network Facebook. When Scott said he thought his grandfather was too busy, the retired professor seemed relieved to have one less thing on his to-do list. After all, Abrams says, "There's always something to write about."

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